

Kelly Country

A. Bertram Chandler

I don't like it here.

It's no worse, I suppose, than where (when?) I really belong, it's just that it's ... different. There are similarities, but they don't help any. Just when I kid myself that the situation (at last!) is coming under control I trip over some damned discrepancy and fall flat on my badly battered face. I thought at first that making a living — after I was discharged from the mental hospital — would be the least of my problems; even though I am a displaced person there's been no need for me to learn a new language. But it hasn't been easy. I had in mind a series of articles on my life and hard times — my life and hard times, that is, before I came here—but it didn't work out. Every newspaper editor whom I approached said that he wasn't interested in fiction, and every magazine editor told me that he wasn't interested in science fiction. SF, for some reasons, just hasn't caught on in this country, and the only fantasy that ever gets published is rehashings of Celtic mythology.

I've tried to track down Siebert, of course. He would be able to help me. But where is he? Two Dr Sieberts I did find, but one is a gynaecologist and the other a dentist. It's Siebert the theoretical physicist I want, but he must still be in his native Austria or Germany or wherever it was that he came from. If I had the money I'd take a trip to Europe to try to find him — but money in a sufficiently large amount is what I haven't got and probably never shall have.

I never have had much, but I was getting by, selling the occasional short story and, now and again, a far from successful novel. Freelance journalism provided the bread on which to spread the precious butter derived from creative writing. I'd get an idea and sell it to one of the editors whom I knew, then scratch around for the material for the series of articles or profiles or whatever. The World Shapers was the series that I was working on when I met Siebert. It dealt with little-known scientists and engineers who might well change, improve even, our way of living. I'd interviewed Dr Canning, who'd made what was essentially a Stirling engine using solar radiation as the external heat source. (It worked, too, and generators so powered would have done much to resolve the energy crisis.) And there was Colonel Remington, a retired army engineer who was an authority on one aspect of aviation. It was Remington's contention that the airship should make a comeback — and this, too, tied in with the fuel crisis. Why burn oil to proceed from Point A to Point B and to stay up when you need burn oil only to proceed from Point A to Point B? He had a beautiful little — not so little, actually — model dirigible, helium filled, with electric motors, radio controlled. He let me play with the controls and fly it over a couple of figure eight circuits. I hope that he finally found somebody to put up the money to build a big ship ... And there was Wellaby, with his thoroughly worked out and costed scheme to tow icebergs from the Antarctic ice barrier to South Australia during times of drought. The fresh water so obtained, he convinced me, would cost no more than fresh water from more conventional sources. And Wellaby tied in with Dahlgren, who had revived the idea of a Central Australian Sea, using nuclear explosions to blast out the basin.

Oh, they were all off-beat, but none of them outrageously so. I wanted a real Mad Scientist to round off the series, somebody with a foreign-sounding name for preference, a refugee from the comic strips. And yet his ideas would have to possess a glimmering of credibility and would have to be capable, if put into effect, of reshaping the world. After all, such people have, now and again, shaken our planet to its foundations. The mildly eccentric, violin-playing Albert Einstein, for example .

So there was I, with the series almost completed, and I had a good market waiting for it and once the money was in the bank I'd be able to carry on with the research for what I hoped would be the Australian novel. All that remained was the Mad Scientist profile. Luckily (unluckily?) I have a retentive memory. I recalled a tongue in cheek interview in one of the dailies with a then newly arrived Dr Siebert. Siebert had been unwise enough to mention the possibility of

it--Time Travel. The interviewer had the time of his young life playing around with all the usual paradoxes — going back through time to murder his grandfather before he as much as met his grandmother, going ahead to read tomorrow's papers and then making a fortune at the races or on the stock exchange . . . If you're at all familiar with a certain type of American science fiction you'll know all the plot gimmicks.

Without too much trouble I was able to get hold of a copy of that paper. It was a little more trouble for me to run Siebert down, but I managed eventually through one — my only one, if you must know — of my academic contacts. The scientific community, I gathered, regarded Siebert no more seriously than that young reporter had done. But I got his address — an old but well preserved and not too blatantly tarted up terrace house in Paddington. He wasn't on the telephone, so I wrote to him. I got no reply. After making due allowance for Post Office inefficiency I wrote again, this time enclosing a stamped, addressed envelope. Again there was no reply. If it hadn't been for that stamped, addressed envelope I'd have dropped the idea of interviewing Dr Siebert and found somebody else. But it was the petty meanness, as it seemed to me, that got my back up.

So I went out to Paddington fairly early on a fine winter's morning. I knew where the house was, of course; I'd located it during the preliminary hunt down of my quarry. I hammered on the old-fashioned brass knocker of the front door. I was on the point of giving up and leaving when I heard footsteps approaching over an uncarpeted wooden floor. The door opened, but only a crack, only to the extent of the chain. I looked down at Siebert and he peered suspiciously up at me. He was a round little man, bald except for the bushes of grey hair over his ears. My immediate impression was of a rather bad tempered koala bear.

I asked politely, "Dr Siebert?"

He countered in a voice that just missed being squeaky, that held strong traces of some middle European accent, "Who else would it be? Your business?"

I tried to put him into a good mood. I apologized for not having made an appointment, and added that it wasn't easy to do so as he wasn't on the

'phone. He told me that telephones are time wasters. By this time my own good mood —such as it was — was fast evaporating. I said that I had written to him, twice, but received no reply. He said that he neither replied to nor even read unimportant correspondence. But he did ask me again what my business was.

I told him my name, took a card out of my notecase and handed it to him. It carried, under the John Carmell, the magic word Journalist. For some reason the sight of that word makes most people ready and willing — often too ready, too willing — to talk. But not Siebert. "A journalist," he told me contemptuously, "knows less about more things than anybody else on this planet." He thrust the card back at me. I took it, put it back in my notecase. He told me to take my foot out of the door so that he could shut it.

But I can be stubborn. I tried to explain to him that I was a freelance, not directly employed by any of the newspapers. I told him about the series of profiles that I was working on. I name dropped. Obviously he had heard of Canning and Dahlgren and I sensed that he was weakening. I mentioned Kraus, the anti-gravity man, who was also in the series. That did it. Siebert, it seemed, knew Kraus. Not only did he know him, he didn't like him. I realized that if I didn't take my foot out of the door I'd finish up with a bad bruise, if nothing worse.

Then it happened. From inside the house, the hallway, came a sharp pfhht!, a sort of soft explosion. From where I was standing I could just see a low table — and on that table had suddenly appeared a wire cage, with something pale moving inside it. There was something else on the table — a white oblong. The animal in the cage chattered loudly. I knew then what it was. A white rat. A laboratory rat.

Siebert seemed even more surprised than I was. He left the door, went to that low table. He picked up the little white oblong. He looked at it. He returned to me.

He said, "It would seem that I did — will — let you in. It would seem that I will stage a demonstration for you. This is your card ... "

I said, "Is this some kind of conjuring trick, Doctor? You gave it back to me."

He said, "I am giving it back to you again."

I looked at it. It was my card all right. I put it back in my notecase.

He said, "You now have one more card than when you left your lodgings this morning."

I said, "Unluckily I don't know how many cards I should have."

He said, "No matter. Come in."

He shut the door briefly to release the chain, reopened it wide. I followed him through the narrow hallway. The white rat chattered at us as we passed it. He said to it, an odd note of affection in his voice, "Do not worry, Adolf.

There will soon be only one of you again... " So Siebert had a device for duplicating rats, I thought. Big deal.

He opened a door at the end of the narrow hallway, switched on the light. It was the machine that first caught -compelled - my attention. It could have been a crazy mobile welded together by some futuristic sculptor from junkyard odds and ends. There were wheels, set at odd angles to each other. There was a control panel with switches and dials and a cathode ray tube. And the perspective of the thing was ... wrong.

Under it was a low platform. On the platform was a wire cage. In the cage was a white rat.

"Adolf," said Siebert as though making an introduction. (Well, he was, I suppose, doing just that.) "He is in a - how do you say? - paradoxical situation. He is coexisting with himself."

That didn't make sense to me. There were, obviously, two white rats, one out in the hallway, the other in this laboratory.

I said, "There are two rats, Doctor."

He said, "There is one rat. Very shortly I shall use the . temporal displacer to send Adolf back through time and over a distance of a few metres. You saw him arrive in what is now the Past. You cannot deny that."

I said, "But one solid body cannot occupy two spaces at the same time. That makes sense, doesn't it? Or doesn't it?" He looked at me quizzically. I went on, "It's that axiom. You know. Two solid bodies cannot occupy the same space at the same time. I just sort of reversed it... "

He asked, "So you have some knowledge of mathematics, of physics, Mr Carmell?"

"Only what I learned in school," I said. "And I've forgotten most of that."

"What do you know about gyroscopes?" he demanded. "Don't they always stay pointing in the same direction?" I suggested.

He allowed himself a slight smile. "Rigidity in space is one of the properties of the gyroscope. Another one is precession. .. "

"Like in the precession of the equinoxes?" I hazarded.

He ignored this. "Imagine a spinning gyroscope. You press down on one end of the axis and it resists the downward pressure. But it does move. It precesses, swings to one side at right angles to the applied force, in the direction of the rotation... "

"I see . " I said doubtfully.

"The rotors of my machine precess," he went on, "but not through any of the dimensions of normal space. But they precess, nevertheless, within the Space-Time continuum."

"Through Time?" I demanded, unbelievably.

"Temporal precession," he assured me.

I didn't say anything, but my disbelief must have been plain on my face. He laughed. "And now, Mr Carmell, the demonstration . . . " He started to fiddle with the dials on the control panel. The rat chittered loudly. "Poor Adolf," he muttered. "He knows what I am doing. He has made the journey, longer journeys, often, but still he is frightened ..." He turned to me. "But wait. Your card . . .

"Any card?" I asked.

"Whatever card you take from your notecase must be the right one," he said.

I gave him the oblong of cardboard and he put it on the platform beside the cage. Then he switched on and the machine, the Time Machine, came to life. The rotors started to spin, slowly at first, then faster and faster. The sound of it rose rapidly from a low humming to a high, almost supersonic whine. In the cathode ray tube was what looked like a revolting circle of green light, but not an ordinary circle. It was somehow important that I think of the name of it. It came to me suddenly. A Mobius strip . . . And the wheels, the rotors . . . They were spinning, gleaming, tumbling, fading, seemingly always about to vanish and yet never doing so.

There was a sharp pfhht!, the sound of an implosion. The rat was gone from the platform, and with it my card.

Siebert stopped the machine then. The rotors slowed, the high whine deepened to subsonic hum, stopped. Again there was the pfhht! The rat flashed into being, chittered at us. But there was no sign of my card.

I asked Siebert where it was.

"But I gave it back to you," he told me, "just before I let you into the house."

I tried to work things out, but gave it up. I asked instead, "What does this thing do, actually?"

He said, "I sent the rat back through Time."

I didn't say "Impossible!" right out loud, but Siebert must have read my expression. He snapped, "You have seen, and yet you doubt."

I said, "Time travel just doesn't happen."

He said, "But it does. We are all Time Travellers, proceeding at a fixed and steady rate from the cradle to the grave..."

"From the womb to the tomb," I amplified. "From the sperm to the worm. From the erection to the resurrection."

He glared at me, then permitted himself a frosty smile. "You have a sense of humour, Mr Carmell," he commented. "But permit me to finish. We are all, as I have said, Time Travellers. But I have discovered how the rate of travel may be accelerated, or reversed. I have given you a demonstration.

Think carefully, now. Could there have been any trickery?"

So I thought carefully. Siebert, I decided, might be a conjuror — but if he were he was a highly professional one. I had seen the rat — and my card — arrive in the hallway, allegedly from what was then the Future. I had seen the rat — or a rat — vanish from the laboratory, allegedly into the Past, and then return. Just to make sure I went to the door, opened it and looked into the narrow hall. The low table was empty.

All right, I thought. I'll play along. Siebert may or may not be a fake, a charlatan but, in any case, there're the makings of a good article here.

"How did . . . Adolf get back here?" I asked.

"Imagine a piece of elastic," said Siebert. "Imagine that it is stretched, temporally as well as spatially, with Adolf, in his cage, on the end of it. The force to stretch that elastic emanates from the machine. When the machine is stopped, the elastic snaps back. It is as simple as that."

Oddly enough, it did sound simple. I was beginning to feel the principles of Time Travel, although I was still far from understanding. That machine — that Time Machine — looked capable of anything, especially when it was working.

Siebert looked at his watch. He said, almost diffidently "At this hour of the morning I usually take refreshment. Would you care to join me?"

I had no objections, of course. I was expecting tea or coffee, but he produced a bottle and two glasses. The bottle contained Schnapps. He served it without ice cubes or water. I'm a beer man myself and that first drink was much stronger than I'm accustomed to. So was the second, and the third . . . Siebert wasn't exactly twisting my arm, but it would have been ill mannered of me to let him drink by himself.

Nonetheless, I made some attempt to get on with the morning's business. "All right, Doctor," I said, "I'll accept that your temporal displacement device does work. Then why don't you use it to travel into the future? Not far, only a day or so, just to get a look at tomorrow's papers. And then you clean up at the races, or on the stock market . . . "

He smiled rather sadly. "I am not a practical man, Mr Carmell," he told me, "but I like money. I have already given thought to doing as you suggest. But the future is ... dangerous . "

"So is the present," I said. "So is — was? — the past."

"Not in the same way," he told me. "You see, it is like this. From every passing second, every microsecond, even, there branch out an infinitude of possible and divergent futures. From every passing second in the past other infinitudes of alternatives have branched out. My machine will send you into one of those possible futures — but, so far, there is no way of knowing which one it will be ... "

Send you, he had said. Send me? Not bloody likely. Although I should like a look at tomorrow's papers . . . Perhaps a dog, I thought, trained to pick

them up from people's front lawns and bring them back . . .

"Adolf," Siegel went on, "has had his predecessors . . . " The white rat chattered at the sound of his name. "Some of them I did send into the future. Two returned dead, without a mark on their bodies. Unfortunately I am not a veterinary surgeon so I could not determine the cause of death. One, obviously, had died in a vacuum. One, one only, returned alive. All the fur was burned from his body. I had to kill him, in pity."

"Oh," I said. "Oh."

"The past," he said, "is safe. The railway tracks, if I may use a simile, are already laid down. There is no possibility of the Time Traveller's being shunted into one of the alternate universes."

I began to suspect a line of sales talk. I said, "You mentioned that only some of Adolf's predecessors were sent into the future. What happened to the ones you sent into the past?"

"They are dead," he told me. "Both of them."

"And you say the past is safe!" I expostulated.

"It was their present that was not safe," he said smugly. "They survived their temporal voyages unscathed. And then one, the first one, escaped from his cage and was killed by the cat that I used to keep. A few weeks later the second one also escaped and ran out into the road. He was flattened by a passing car."

He poured more drinks. Was he trying to soften me up? That thought did flicker across my apology for a mind, but only briefly. But there was some sort of nigger in the woodpile, I couldn't help feeling.

I asked, "If the past is all that safe, Doctor, why haven't you travelled back through time? Think of the historical novels you could write, with every detail dinkum as all hell. You could make money that way, as a writer . "

"But I cannot write," he said sadly. "I know my limitations. Too, somebody would have to — how do you say? —mind the shop. I have no assistant trained to operate the machine during my absence ... " He paused. "But you ... ?"

"No thanks!" I told him hastily. "Not me. I haven't a mechanical mind. Any machine that I as much as lay a finger on, goes on the blink."

He said, "That is not what I meant. You are a writer, Mr Carmell. And a reporter. There is so very much that you could write about. An eye witness account of the Crucifixion

I told him that I wasn't a religious man.

He went on persuasively. "Then, perhaps, the Battle of Waterloo? No? Or the Battle of Gettysburg? One of my ancestors was there. As you know, quite a number of European military officers served with the Union forces .  
.. "

"No ... " I said.

"Ah," said he brightly. "I think I see. Those battles are not Australian history. Then the landing at Gallipoli?"

"No," I said again, but he sensed that I was weakening. He asked just what and where and when was it that I wanted.

Like a mug, I told him. I earbashed him about the novel that I'd been meaning to write for quite some time, on which I had already done preliminary research. He was rather surprised, I think, at my choice of place and period. He said, "But this Ned Kelly . I have, of course, heard of him — he was no more than a robber, a — how do you say — bushranger."

This annoyed me. I said that Ned Kelly was more, much more than that. He was a freedom fighter, a guerrilla leader, with a charisma that has survived to the present day. He might have been much more than a hunted criminal if the cards had fallen a little differently . . . I ran down, out of breath, refreshed myself with a gulp of Schnapps, then went on. "It was the Siege of Glenrowan that I wanted to see," I said, "with that great, armoured figure tramping through the low mist like some huge robot, striking terror into the hearts of the cowardly policemen ...

"I want to see Ned Kelly played by himself, not by Mick Jagger!" I concluded.

"And why not, Mr Carmell?" asked Siebert softly. And even more softly, "It is time that a human being made the journey, not some mere rat . . . " Then, briskly, "The time and the place, if you please. The temporal and spatial coordinates?"

"Glenrowan," I told him. "The early morning, at about half past two, of June 28, 1880 ... "

He said that he would have to find out the exact latitude and longitude, and left me. He gestured towards the bottle and my empty glass as he walked, just a little unsteadily, out of the laboratory.

I helped myself to another drink. The bottle was so nearly finished that it seemed pointless to leave anything in it. There was nobody to talk to except the rat, Adolf, in his cage, so I talked to him. He seemed to understand what I was saying. I told him that I should have a mascot with me for my voyage into the wild colonial past. (I used to keep white rats when I was a kid, and still rather liked them.) I managed, after a struggle, to get the door of the cage open. I stuffed Adolf into my breast pocket just before Siebert came back. Adolf didn't seem to mind. And the learned Doctor didn't notice that the cage was empty.

He was putting on a bit of a whinge, in fact, complaining that although he had charts and maps for all over the world Glenrowan was hard to find. He fussed around with the controls of his machine, setting the dials for the coordinates of my destination. I remember hoping that he was sober enough to get things right, not to send me back to watch the building of the pyramids or the construction of the Great Wall of China or something else in which I wasn't interested. Not that I was all that sober myself. If I



had been I'd never have climbed on to that platform, under that assemblage of cock-eyed flywheels in that distorted framework. But, as I've said, I was feeling no pain. I even made a joke.

I said, in what was meant to be a German accent but probably wasn't, "You may the count-down commence, Herr Doktor!"

Siebert stared at me bewilderedly, then suddenly realized that I was trying to be funny. His imitation American accent was no more convincing than my German one had been. "All systems Go! Go! Go!"

His finger stabbed a button. Over my head those blasted wheels started to turn and the rotating circle of green light appeared in the cathode ray tube. The low humming of the gyroscopes rose rapidly in frequency to a thin, high whine, painful to the ear.

And...

And I was alone, and I was cold, and I was sober. And I was frightened.

I wondered at first if Siebert's sums had come out wrong, landing me in the middle of Siberia in mid-winter. It seemed cold enough. I was wearing only a light summer suit. I opened my eyes, dreading what I might see. There was a railroad track — the trans-Siberian railroad? — and, not too far away, a tiny cluster of yellow lights. A lopsided moon hung high in the clear sky, indicating but doing little to illuminate the shadowy masses of trees and bushes. Some nocturnal bird was kicking up a raucous racket. In the distance a dog barked, the sound carrying clearly in the still air. Also carrying clearly, but not loudly, was the music of a piano accordion. It seemed to come from that little huddle of lights. It sounded like an Irish jig. Well, I thought, at least it wasn't Russian .. .

There was another light and it was unsteady, moving, approaching me. Somebody was walking along the track, from the village, carrying a lantern. I stood there, waiting for him. He didn't see me until he was almost on me; he had been too engrossed in making his way without tripping over the railway sleepers.

And then he looked up and stared at me.

"Who are you?" he asked in a shaky voice, in a rather soft English accent that I couldn't quite place.

I thought that I knew who he was, but I had to be sure. I asked, reasonably enough, "Where and when am I?"

He asked, rather angrily, if I was mad or intoxicated. I repeated my question.

He replied shortly, "Glenrowan, of course." Then he went on, angrily, "Out of my way, sir! Ned Kelly and all his gang are in the hotel, drinking and singing, waiting for the special train. They've torn up the tracks on the other side of the village. I must stop it, or God alone knows what will happen!"

I said, "So you are Thomas Curnow "

"And who are you, sir?" he demanded. "Are you one of them?"

I was standing with my back to the moon so that my face was in shadow. He raised his lantern so that he could see me more clearly. He raised his lantern — and gasped, and dropped it. There was a little crash of broken glass, a brief flare from the exposed wick, the stink of spilled kerosene.

"A head . . . " he muttered, "looking out of your pocket . . Two red eyes . . ."

For a second or so I was as frightened as he was, then I remembered taking the white rat from Siebert's laboratory. "It's only Adolf ... " I said soothingly.

"Adolf?"

"He's a rat. A white rat. A sort of pet ... "

"The train." he said.

The train . . . Yes, it was coming all right, and coming fast, the chuffing rattle of the old steam locomotives carrying loudly over the rapidly diminishing distance. There had been delays, I remembered, and the drivers, urged by Superintendent Hare, would be trying to make up time, to reach the township of Wangaratta before the Kelly Gang rode away to continue their depredations elsewhere. (They had ridden away, of course, and were actually at Glenrowan — but Hare did not know that. Yet.)

And what else did I remember? Curnow had carried a red scarf as well as a lantern. And there was a good moon .. .

Curnow took his stance in the middle of the track, the red scarf in his hand. The man had courage. He stood there —and I, like a bloody fool, stood there with him. We could see the train now — the pilot engine in the lead, its headlight dim by today's standards but, no doubt, considered dazzlingly bright in that day and age. There was a ruddy glare from the firebox as the door was opened, illuminating the smoke and steam billowing from the funnel. There was a shower of sparks.

We stood there, while that steel, fire-breathing monster roared closer and closer. We stood there, with Curnow frantically waving that scarf. The driver must have seen us. Perhaps he thought that we were Kelly supporters attempting to delay the special train still further. But whether he saw us or not it was clear that he had no intention of stopping.

Curnow stood his ground — or would have if I hadn't dragged him with me as I jumped clear at the very last moment. We rolled on the rough gravel, bruised, clothing torn and skin scratched and bleeding, as the train rattled past — the pilot engine first and then the locomotive with its short string of coaches. I heard horses whinnying in answer to the piercing blast of the leading engine's steam whistle.

Then there was comparative silence. I scrambled to my feet, helped Curnow to his. We started after the fast diminishing red rear light on the guard's van. It drew level with, then passed the little cluster of lights that marked

Glen-rowan.

He said bitterly, "God alone knows what will happen now. It could be what I have been dreading, a revolution. The wild Irish against the English squatters . . . "

Beyond Glenrowan there was a crash — but not as loud as I had been expecting. There was another crash — and that came up to my worst expectations. It was a series of crashes, actually. I could visualize the locomotive of the special train itself ploughing into the overturned pilot engine, the coaches jackknifing . . . Whatever else has changed, train wrecks still follow a well established pattern. And we could hear the shouting and the screaming — more screaming than shouting, of horses as well as of humans.

We started to run along the track towards the wreck but neither of us was especially fit and, in the uncertain moonlight, we were stumbling over the sleepers. We slowed to a walk, as rapid a walk as we could manage in the circumstances. We passed the hotel; its door was wide open, the yellow lamplight streaming out. The place seemed to be deserted.

Ahead of us there was gunfire — rifles and revolvers it sounded like. So some of the police had survived, were putting up a fight . . .

They were still fighting when, at last, we stumbled on to the scene of the wreck. The air was heavy with acrid powder fumes, with smoke from the burning wreckage, and through this mist moved the figures of the outlaws, seemingly invulnerable to the fire that was being directed at them.

They were still fighting, although the battle was almost over.

Curnow and I approached one of the splintered coaches in time to see a giant figure discharge his revolver into the face of a bulky man in civilian clothing — and that was the end of it, although some of the injured horses were still neighing.

I heard one of the outlaws say to the giant, "Ned, the poor horses . . . "

"We shall have to shoot them," was the reply.

"And there are women here, Ned," went on the smaller man. "Dead . . . "

Women? Inspector O'Connor's wife had been aboard that train, I remembered, and a Miss Smith, her sister. I remembered, too, that Ned Kelly had boasted that never had he harmed a woman .

"Women . . . " said the giant, his voice muffled and distorted by the cylindrical steel helmet of his armour. "This time we have gone too far. But we have to fight on ... Perhaps the bold Fenian men in America will help us . . . " Then he said heavily, "It had to come to this."

I couldn't resist the temptation. I said, "You aren't supposed to say that until you're on the gallows, Mr Kelly."

He swung to face me. His eyes glared at me from the slit in the cylindrical helmet. His heavy revolver came up to point at me. I knew that I'd have to

talk hard and fast and convincingly if I wished to escape the fate of Superintendent Hare. But I never had a chance to.

That moonlit scene with the wrecked train, the dead policemen and the living outlaws, flickered out like a snuffed candle. I was conscious of the thin, high whine of Siebert's machine. But there was something wrong. The sound was unsteady, oscillating. And there was a twang, like suddenly snapping a violin string.

Bright summer sunlight hurt my eyes. When I could see, I found that I was staring into a ruddy face, a man's face, rough, with mouth agape in amazement.

"And where the hell did ye come from?" he muttered. "An' is that a rat in yer buttonhole, or am I seein' things?"

I ignored his question. There were so many that I wanted to ask myself. Where was I, and when? I was not back in Siebert's laboratory, that was for sure. I was outside, on a hot summer's day. There was a crowd around me, men in slacks and brightly coloured shirts, gaily miniskirted women — but only that drunk seemed to have noticed my arrival. There was music, a military band approaching, and the air was familiar enough. It was Waltzing Matilda.

So I was, at least, in the right country.

And I was on the waterfront. It was almost familiar. The shoreline that I could see over the rippled blueness of Sydney Cove — if it was Sydney Cove — looked like Kirribilli. And Bennelong Point looked as Bennelong Point had looked before the building of the Opera House. But there wasn't any Opera House, although there was a bridge from Dawes Point to Milsons Point — but not our bridge, not the familiar coat hanger. It was a great suspension bridge, a scaled down version of San Francisco's Golden Gate. But there were ferry piers along the Circular Quay and on the western shore of the cove was an overseas passenger terminal, and alongside it a big, grey ship.

The band was close now. I could see the uniformed players through the crowd. Scots? No, although they wore kilts, yellow kilts . . . But hadn't the Irish once worn kilts, saffron kilts? Kilts they were wearing, and bright green tunics, and breastplates of polished metal, and odd, cylindrical helmets, and the soldiers who marched after them were similarly clad.

"Three cheers, me boys!" somebody shouted. "Three cheers for Ned Kelly's Own!"

When the cheering had subsided I turned again to the man who had seen me arrive. I tapped his arm. I said, "Excuse me . . ."

He turned and regarded me owlshly. "There'sh no excuse," he said with drunken solemnity, "for a man who comesh from nowhere an' wearsh a white rat in hish buttonhole."

"Please, where am I?"

"Ye mean ye don't know Shydneey when ye shee it?" "Please, what date is

it?"

"Ye're drunker than I am, mister, an' I've had a skinful. 'Tis Deshember the twelfth — or ish it the thirteenth? I'm not too sure meself — 1975 . . . "

I persisted, although he was beginning to edge away from me.

"Those soldiers, marching to the troopship . . . Where are they bound?"

If I hadn't by this time taken a firm grip on his elbow he would have got away from me.

"Vietnam," he muttered. "Where elshe?"

"But the war's over," I said.

"The war over? Ye must be mad. The war'll never be over long as there'sh a shingle, Christ-hatin', Commie bastard left alive . . . "

He angrily shook his arm out of my grasp and melted into the crowd. Looking after him I saw the light breeze lift the folds of the huge ensign at the stern of the troop transport. It was a green flag, with the stars of the Southern Cross, in gold, at the fly, and a golden harp in the upper canton.